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DOI:

[10.1002/hyp.13147](https://doi.org/10.1002/hyp.13147)

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Document Version

Peer reviewed version

Citation for published version (Harvard):

Longobardi, A & Van Loon, A 2018, 'Assessing baseflow index vulnerability to variation in dry spell length for a range of catchment and climate properties', *Hydrological Processes*, pp. 1-14. <https://doi.org/10.1002/hyp.13147>

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1 **ASSESSING BASEFLOW INDEX VULNERABILITY TO VARIATION IN DRY SPELL**
2 **LENGTH FOR A RANGE OF CATCHMENT AND CLIMATE PROPERTIES**

3

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11 **Abstract**

12 Baseflow index (BFI) prediction in ungauged basins has largely been based on the use of catchment
13 physiographic attributes as dominant variables. In a context where changes in climate are
14 increasingly evident, it is also important to study how the slow component of flow is potentially
15 affected by climate. The aim of this study was to illustrate the impact of climate variability on the
16 baseflow process based on analysis of daily rainfall characteristics and hydrological modelling
17 simulation exercises validated with observed data. Ten catchments were analysed that span southern
18 to northern Europe and range from arid Mediterranean to maritime temperate climate conditions.
19 Additionally, more than two thousand virtual catchments were modelled that cover an extended
20 gradient of physiographic and climate properties. The relative amounts of baseflow were
21 summarized by the BFI. The catchment slow response delay time (K_s) was assumed to be a
22 measure of catchment effects, and the impact of climate properties was investigated with the dry
23 spell length (d). Well-drained and poorly-drained groups were identified based on K_s and d , and
24 their response to an increase or decrease in dry spell length was analysed. Overall, for either well-
25 or poorly-drained groups, an extension in dry spell length appeared to have minor effects on the
26 baseflow compared with a decrease in dry spell length. Under the same dry spell variation, the BFI
27 vulnerability appeared higher for catchments characterized by large initial d values in combination
28 with poorly-drained systems, but attributing an equal weight to the variations in d both in the case
29 of dry and wet initial conditions, it is in the end concluded that the BFI vulnerability appear higher
30 for systems laying in the transition zone between well- and poorly-drained systems.

31

32 **Keywords:** Baseflow, Low flows, BFI, Dry spells, IAHCRES, catchment characteristics, climate

33

34 1. INTRODUCTION

35 The baseflow index (BFI), the ratio between the volume of baseflow and the volume of total
36 streamflow, was originally recommended in the Low Flow Studies ([Institute of Hydrology, 1980](#))
37 for indexing the effect of geology on low flows; however, the BFI now represents a general index of
38 catchment hydrological response. Among various applications, BFI has been implemented as an
39 index of river flow regime classification ([Kennard et al., 2010](#); [Bejarano et al., 2010](#); [Olden and](#)
40 [Poff, 2012](#)) and, as such, has also been used to detect hydrological regime changes along with other
41 low flow indices ([Sawicz et al., 2014](#), [Coopersmith et al., 2014](#), [Crooks and Kay, 2015](#)).

42 Although the importance of the impact of geological catchment properties on BFI is universally
43 understood ([Gustard et al., 1989](#); [Schneider et al., 2007](#); [Longobardi and Villani, 2013](#); [Zhang et al.,](#)
44 [2013](#)), the role of climate variables is less clear ([Stoelzle et al., 2014](#); [Van Loon and Laaha, 2015](#),
45 [Staudinger et al., 2015](#)). Recent global scale assessments of BFI patterns and the relevant influence
46 of various climate factors have generally focused on average climate characteristics, such as the
47 mean annual precipitation, mean annual potential evapotranspiration, mean annual air temperature,
48 and the intra-annual seasonality of precipitation ([Beck et al., 2013](#); [Sawicz et al., 2014](#)).

49 A general agreement exists that climate (change or variability) has the potential to substantially alter
50 river flow regimes. A global assessment has been reported in [Arnell and Gosling, 2013](#). At the
51 European scale, a large body of literature provides indications regarding the considerable climate
52 change projections that will impact hydrological systems. As a general trend, high latitude areas of
53 northern Europe appear to face an increase in the number of wet days and thus a decrease in the
54 duration of dry spells. Conversely, southern Europe Mediterranean areas appear to face a decrease
55 in the number of wet days and thus an increase in dry spell duration ([Rajah et al., 2014](#); [Jacob et al,](#)
56 [2014](#); [Pascale et al., 2016](#)). In a context where changes in climate are increasingly evident, it is
57 important to study how the proportion of the slow component of flow is potentially affected by
58 short-term rainfall properties.

59 The dry spell length and the catchment delay time, as well as their relative probability distributions,
60 have in the past been considered to be primary descriptive parameters of the catchment hydrological
61 response (Botter et al., 2013; Muller et al., 2014; Doulatyari et al., 2015). For example, Botter et al.
62 (2013) showed how a combination of these descriptors can be used to determine the resilience of
63 erratic and persistent regime systems to climate fluctuations. None of these studies, however,
64 specifically focused on the baseflow component of the hydrograph. Therefore, in this study, we aim
65 to illustrate the impact of climate variability and, in particular, the impact of dry spell duration on
66 the baseflow process, summarized by the BFI index. We do this with a combined data-based and
67 modelling study, investigating the hydrological behaviour of observed and virtual catchments that
68 spanned a broad gradient of climate conditions and catchment properties.

69 In this study, two characteristic time scales were used, the dry spell length and the catchment delay
70 time, to represent the effect of climate and catchment properties, respectively, on the BFI index.
71 Investigated catchments were grouped into well-drained and poorly-drained systems based on their
72 features. Catchments featured by perennial water resources, the well-drained group, were associated
73 with prevailing slow streamflow components, large BFI values and long delays or recession times.
74 Catchments with intermittent water resources, the poorly-drained group, were associated with fast
75 prevailing streamflow components, small BFI values and short delay times.

76 To understand if both systems were affected by dry spell temporal variation to the same extent, a
77 simulation approach was used where, given the generation of daily rainfall time series characterized
78 by different average dry spell, the total discharge of the investigated catchments was computed in
79 response to the generated rainfall scenarios, and BFIs were extracted by the application of a
80 hydrograph filtering algorithm.

81 The primary findings of this study will help to elucidate the extent to which catchment properties
82 can mitigate climate fluctuations and to determine which catchment properties are most meaningful
83 for this purpose.

85 2. BFI ASSESSMENT FOR OBSERVED CATCHMENTS

86 2.1 Data description

87 Because the current investigation is focused on the impact of dry spell characterization on BFI
88 assessment, the observed catchments were principally selected to provide a broad spectrum of
89 climate conditions covered by a north-south European transect from extremely dry and seasonal
90 types (typically in southern Europe) to temperate and oceanic types (typically in northern Europe).
91 Moreover, because this study was concerned with BFI assessment, catchments were also selected to
92 provide a broad range of BFI values and the correspondingly broad range of catchment delay times.
93 According to these rules, daily streamflow, rainfall and temperature data were collated for 10
94 catchments across Europe from local water agencies or as part of previous studies ([Brauer et al.,](#)
95 [2011](#); [Van Lanen and Dijkma, 1999](#); [Van Huijgevoort et al., 2011](#); [Mehaiguene et al., 2012](#); [Van](#)
96 [Loon and Van Lanen, 2013](#); [Longobardi and Villani, 2013](#)). The locations of the investigated
97 catchments are indicated in [Figure 1](#).

98 Catchment areas vary between 6.5 and 16500 km², and mean catchment elevation ranges between
99 165 and 1060 m.a.s.l. The range of average annual precipitation is 347–1588 mm, with the largest
100 values occurring for a humid region in southern Italy ([Longobardi et al., 2016](#)). Climate regime
101 indications are provided with reference to the Köppen-Geiger climate classification ([Figure 1](#); [Peel](#)
102 [et al., 2007](#)). A typical mean monthly rainfall distribution is provided in [Figure 1](#) for each of the
103 investigated regions. Climate regimes range from dry type B to temperate type C classes. Semi-arid
104 (Bsk) climates and Mediterranean climate conditions (Csa-Csb) are observed in the southern area of
105 the investigated domain and are characterized by a rather marked seasonal distribution. Temperate
106 oceanic climate conditions (Cfb) prevail in the northern area of the domain and are characterized by
107 a more uniformly distributed precipitation regime. Average annual runoff ranges between 22 and
108 1309 mm/yr, and none of the catchments shows important snow accumulation and melt processes.
109 Bedrock permeabilities (derived from the Global Hydrogeology MAPs product; Gleeson et al.,
110 2014) range between 10⁻⁴ and 10⁻⁹ m/s, ranging from high to extremely low values,. Soil types

111 range from podzols to cambisols to calcisols according to the FAO classification ([Soil Atlas of](#)
112 [Europe, 2005](#)). More information is provided in [Table 1](#).

113

114 **2.2 Baseflow separation**

115 Hydrograph components separation was performed to assess the catchment long-term BFI.
116 Following the definition of the Institute of Hydrology ([1980](#)), a BFI value was assessed as the ratio
117 between the volume of baseflow and the volume of total streamflow; to derive the baseflow volume,
118 baseflow separation was performed for each catchment.

119 At least three main categories of separation algorithms can be cited: empirical, digital filter-based
120 and model-based techniques. Each procedure is, to a large extent, arbitrary ([Hewlett and Hibbert,](#)
121 [1967](#)) but provides a repeatable methodology to derive objective measures or indices related to a
122 particular streamflow source. Recursive digital filters (RDF) are the most commonly used methods
123 for estimating baseflow because of their simplicity and quick implementation, which only needs
124 streamflow data ([Eckhardt 2005; Aksoy et al., 2009; Li et al., 2014](#)), even though RDF parameters
125 are questionable in certain cases, and geochemical or isotopic method calibration would improve
126 the separation between slow and fast components ([Lott and Stewart, 2013; Longobardi et al., 2016](#)).
127 Among RDFs, the Lyne and Hollick method ([Lyne and Hollick, 1979; Ladson et al., 2013](#)) seemed
128 to be the most flexible approach and to have better performance for a wide range of climate
129 conditions and catchment properties ([Li et al., 2014, Longobardi et al, 2016](#)). Because of these
130 reasons, the Lyne and Hollick filter was selected for this study as a simple smoothing and
131 separation rule to separate the baseflow from the total streamflow hydrograph. The Lyne and
132 Hollick method acts as a low-pass filter to remove the high frequency quickflow component of
133 streamflow from the low frequency baseflow component. The filter equation predicts the quickflow
134 q_q component at a time step t by

$$135 \quad q_q(t) = \alpha q_q(t-1) + \frac{1+\alpha}{2} [q(t) - q(t-1)], \quad (1)$$

136 subject to the restriction $q_q > 0$, where α is the filter parameter that affects the degree of attenuation.

137 The baseflow component q_b at time step t is the difference between total streamflow q and

138 quickflow q_q :

139
$$q_b(t) = q(t) - q_q(t), \quad (2)$$

140 subject to the restriction $q_b \leq q$. According to [Nathan and McMahon \(1990\)](#), the value of the filter

141 that yields the most acceptable results in term of baseflow separation is in the range of 0.9 to 0.95.

142 The filter was passed over the data three times, forward, backward and forward again, for a larger

143 smoothing effect, as suggested by [Nathan and McMahon \(1990\)](#).

144 The result of the assessment is illustrated in [Table 1](#). The BFI showed a large range for the studied

145 catchments, varying from 20% to 80%. The correlation between the BFI and catchment area (8%),

146 mean annual precipitation (3%) and mean annual runoff (3%) appears not relevant. Although not

147 significant, a larger positive correlation (43%) appeared between BFI and the permeability values

148 reported in [Table 1](#). Geo-hydrological soil properties are tightly related to the BFI, and the weak

149 numerical correlation extent found in the current analysis was probably because the permeability

150 values indicated in [Table 1](#) did not account for soil properties and were primarily derived from

151 bedrock type.

152

153 **3. CHARACTERISTIC SCALE IDENTIFICATION**

154 As discussed in the introduction, BFI vulnerability to dry spell length variation was investigated as

155 a function of two characteristic time scales: the catchment delay time “Ks” and the dry spell length

156 “d”. The first scale parameter helps to distinguish between catchments based on catchment

157 characteristics, particularly between poorly and well-drained catchments. The second scale

158 parameter helps to distinguish between catchments on the basis of climate characteristics. The

159 mentioned scales were identified by a modelling approach which was subsequently used to

160 investigate the mutual interaction between climate and catchment properties.

161

162 3.1 Daily streamflow modelling

163 In view of the modelling analysis that will follow, it is particularly interesting and also conceptually
164 important to differentiate the catchments based on their hydrological response times. A high number
165 and broad range of rainfall-runoff models are available for this aim. Popular physically based
166 models were not considered in this study; simple conceptual approaches have instead been
167 preferred, because although minimal in terms of model input and parametrization, they are able to
168 capture catchment behaviour for highly different climate and basin properties. Among the
169 conceptual rainfall-runoff models, the IAHCRES transfer function approach was selected ([Jakeman](#)
170 [and Hornberger, 1993](#)). According to a large number of scientific papers, IHACRES appears to be a
171 flexible and versatile model that has been applied to a very broad range of purposes from traditional
172 streamflow prediction ([Razavi and Coulibaly, 2013](#)), water resources management ([Alredaisy,](#)
173 [2011](#)), and water quality studies ([Letcher et al., 2002](#)) to reservoir operating rules management
174 ([Ahmadi et al., 2014](#)). Studies exploring the role of climate changes and land cover changes on the
175 hydrological response have also applied IHACRES ([Evans and Schreider, 2002](#); [Croke et al., 2004](#),
176 [Aronica and Bonaccorso, 2013](#)).

177 The IHACRES model accounts for the non-linearity in the catchment response by a rainfall loss
178 filter module driven by climatic forcing. Further down, a routing module considers the existence of
179 two streamflow pathways, slow and fast, that contribute with different weights (time of delay and
180 relative volumetric throughput) to total streamflow based on catchment characteristics. The
181 conceptual separation between slow and fast paths enables the user to characterize the delay times
182 for both streamflow components. The slow path delay time K_s was used in the current study to
183 quantify the hydrological response characteristic time scale.

184 To test the ability of the model to describe the catchment hydrological behaviour under the climate
185 and geology gradient considered in this study, the model was applied to the 10 catchments under
186 investigation and its performance was measured in terms of the following statistics. Slow flow
187 component delay time (K_s) and slow flow component volumetric throughput coefficient (vs) are

illustrated in Table 2. Statistics used to measure model performance were the NSE (Nash and Sutcliffe Efficiency coefficient), the coefficient of determination (r^2), the LNSE (Nash and Sutcliffe Efficiency with logarithmic values), and d (index of agreement; Willmott et al., 1985). Because the catchment vulnerability to dry spell length variability was quantified in terms of long-term BFI changes, it was important to understand how reasonable the BFI values provided by the modelling approach were. To quantify such a feature, BFI_{cal} , the BFI value obtained by filtering the modelled time series after calibration, and the BFI relative error percentage between the BFI (computed for observed time series) and BFI_{cal} were also estimated. Metrics estimation is provided in Table 2. Overall model performance appeared rather satisfactory. Average NSE was approximately 0.7 (min 0.67), average r^2 was approximately 0.85 (min 0.81), average LNSE was approximately 0.66 (min 0.45) and average D was approximately 0.73 (min 0.63). The relative percentage error between the BFI computed for the observed time series and the BFI_{cal} computed for the modelled time series was negligible with an average value of approximately 6%. There was no systematic bias in the BFI model results with both positive and negative deviations from observed values (Table 2) The need to use a specific simulation approach that provided optimal results for the different climate and catchment property conditions was considered and thus appears to be congruent with the selected model.

3.2 Daily rainfall modelling

The characteristic time scale for climate settings is the dry spell d, the period between two consecutive rainfall occurrences. A stochastic point process approach was adopted to describe and assess the characteristic time scale for each of the investigated catchments and for the subsequent generation of daily rainfall series to be used as inputs in the following simulation analysis. The daily rainfall time series were modelled as stochastic Poisson processes with rectangular pulses (PRP) (Rodriguez-Iturbe et al., 1987). The arrival times of daily rainfall storms were assumed to follow a Poisson process of rate λ such that the dry spells were independently and identically

distributed as exponential random variables with mean $d=1/\lambda$ days. Rainfall intensity at time t was obtained as the sum of intensities of all overlapping storms that occurred at that time, which could be generated for each storm occurrence marked by the Poisson process. Rainfall intensity had an exponential distribution with parameter μ .

Average d duration for the studied catchments ranged between a minimum of approximately 3 days (HUP - Cfb) and a maximum of approximately 14 days (PLA - Csa) from northern to southern latitudes (Table 3). Rainfall intensity ranged between approximately 1 mm/d (DJE - Bsk) and 4.36 mm/d (BUS – Csa, Csb), with a relatively lower dependence on a catchment's geographical coordinates (Table 4).

For the successive simulation analyses it was important to confirm the suitability of the PRP approach for the case studies. To assess the goodness-of-fit for the studied data, main descriptive statistics (mean, maximum, standard deviation) for observed and modelled daily rainfall were quantified and are reported in Table 3 and Table 4. Additionally, observed and modelled daily rainfall cumulative distributions were compared with the use of the average absolute percentage error (AAPE), defined as

$$AAPE = \frac{1}{n} \sum_{i=1}^n \left| \frac{F_{obs,i} - F_{mod,i}}{F_{obs,i}} \right| \quad (3)$$

where i is the percentile order, $F_{obs,i}$ is the cumulative distribution for observed daily rainfall corresponding to the i -th percentile, $F_{mod,i}$ is the cumulative distribution for modelled daily rainfall corresponding to the i -th percentile, and n is the number of percentiles. AAPE values are also reported in Table 3 and Table 4.

Overall model performance appears to have been rather satisfactory. The d process, which is of particular interest in the current research, appears to have been well represented. Errors in cumulative distribution fitting were smaller than 10% for half of the catchments and not larger than 25% for the remaining catchments (Table 3). Beyond mean values, the maximum values for dry

spell length also appeared congruent with the observations (Table 3). Similar comments hold for the rainfall intensity, with a moderate increase in the goodness-of-fit errors (Table 4).

240

4. THE RELATION BETWEEN OBSERVED CATCHMENT BFI, CATCHMENT DELAY AND DRY SPELL

For the number of investigated catchments, Ks ranged between approximately 30 days (HUP) to 200 days (NOO), as reported in Table 2. When BFI values were plotted against Ks values, catchments appeared to have been naturally forced into two clusters as indicated in Figure 2, where the empirical relation between Ks and BFI is illustrated.

The well-drained group was characterized by a delay time longer than 80 days and BFI values larger than 0.5. Within this group, the empirical relationship Ks-BFI showed increasing BFI for increasing delay times. Larger Ks (larger BFI) values generally occurred for high permeability and/or high water holding capacity soils (Table 1). The poorly-drained group was characterized by delay times shorter than 80 days and BFI values smaller than 0.5. For this group, the empirical relationship Ks-BFI was not as evident as in the well-drained one because catchments having similar response delay times were associated with very different BFI values. For example, the Platis (PLA) and Hupsel (HUP) catchment delay times were approximately 44 days and 30 days, respectively, but the BFI for HUP was 50% larger than the BFI for PLA. Lower Ks (lower BFI) values were generally associated with low permeability and low water holding capacity soils (Table 1).

The empirical relationship between d and the BFI was less clear because the same values of d related to extremely different BFI values (Figure 3). Groups were indeed still noticeable, but they were primarily driven by the BFI value, and poorly-drained catchments lay respectively above and below the threshold of $BFI = 0.5$. Within each group, although it was more evident for the well-drained group, a more uniform precipitation distribution represented by a small value of d, typical in medium to northern latitude climates, related to larger BFI. As an example, the Platis (PLA) and

264 Hupsel (HUP) difference in BFI assessment previously cited seems to be justified by their relative d
265 values; the Hupsel catchment was indeed forced by more uniform precipitation occurrences, which
266 made the related hydrological regime more persistent and subsequently yielded a larger BFI value
267 compared with the Platis catchment.

268 The coevolution of climate and geology is not new to the scientific literature (Troch et al., 2015).
269 Both at plot and regional scales, climate features control soil development and soil properties
270 (Lavee et al., 1997) to the point that climate changes are supposed to affect and induce changes in
271 hydro-geomorphological processes (Lane, 2013). Catchment delay times are frequently considered
272 as constant parameters and related to catchment properties; however, for a more realistic simulation,
273 particularly of the baseflow time series, concern has been raised about a dependence on the climate
274 regime properties (He et al., 2016; Longobardi et al., 2016). The dataset used for the current
275 analysis empirically depicts such a relation, although it represents a small sample (Figure 4).
276 Although rather scattered, a tendency seems to appear in Figure 4 where the larger the d, the smaller
277 the Ks (the less uniform the precipitation regime, the less persistent the hydrological regime). The
278 Hupsel catchment represents an exception to the rule, probably because of the combination of very
279 low permeability and small drainage area.

280 Soil and geological properties and climate effects on the baseflow properties could be individually
281 considered only to a limited extent because they have the potential to impact each other and
282 mitigate the relevant effects. To summarize their mutual impact on the BFI, the ratio between the
283 characteristic time scales could be considered, that is, d/K_s .

284 If the BFI is in fact plotted against the d/K_s values, the existence of well- and poorly-drained groups
285 resulted in an almost univocal relation, such as for the case of Ks dependence (Figure 2); however,
286 in this case, the impact of d was also considered (Figure 5). In fact, this pattern enabled the group
287 definitions to be maintained and the BFI values to be sorted as an inverse decreasing function of
288 d/K_s . Large d/K_s values defined the domain of catchments where d and Ks were of the same order
289 of magnitude. Poorly-drained catchments were located in this section with BFI values of

290 approximately 25%. Inversely, low d/K_s values defined the domain of catchments where $d \ll K_s$.
291 Well-drained catchments were located in this section, with a BFI larger than 60% being observed.
292 The use of the ratio d/K_s in the description of the BFI variability also quantitatively strengthens the
293 dependence of this index on the characteristic time scales identified. By using a regression model to
294 explain the variability of the BFI with respect to the K_s parameter alone, we find that the variance
295 explained is very high in the case of the well-drained group (85%) and very low in the case of the
296 poorly-drained group (22%). Using instead the ratio d/K_s , the variance explained with respect to the
297 whole set of basins is equal to 85%.
298 If the introduction of the weight d on K_s does not appear significant for the well-drained group, it
299 made it possible to distinguish between poorly-drained catchments with the same hydrological
300 properties but different climate parameters.
301 The representation provided in [Figure 5](#) justifies indeed the previously mentioned observed
302 differences between HUP and PLA, assigns them significantly different d/K_s ratios, and embeds the
303 significant differences in terms of d .

304

305 **5. MODELLED IMPACT OF DRY SPELL DURATION ON OBSERVED CATCHMENT**

306 **BFI**

307 Next we used a simulation approach to measure how changes in dry spell length propagate through
308 the catchment response to produce changes in the BFI values. Changes in d included both a
309 decrease (wetter conditions) and an increase (drier conditions) in d . Each of the catchments in [Table](#)
310 [1](#) is characterized by a deterministic catchment response; the hydrological model parameters ([Table](#)
311 [2](#)) were thus kept constant, as well as the slow path delay time K_s . For each of the catchments,
312 several daily rainfall scenarios were generated according to the PRP model, each characterized by a
313 different value for d . The parameter range for d was based on the empirical study, which covered an
314 exhaustive gradient of climate conditions. The average daily d was assumed to vary between 3 and

16 days To compare catchments, only increases or decreases of 20% and 50% of the initial \bar{d} value were considered in the modelling exercise (Figure 6).

Generated rainfall scenarios were then used to force the IHACRES model to simulate the catchment response, and the Lyne and Hollick algorithm was used to derive the baseflow series from the simulated total streamflow series to quantify the BFI index. Overall, an increase in \bar{d} , that is a shift towards drier conditions, led to a decrease in the BFI (Δ_{dry}); in contrast, a decrease in \bar{d} , that is a shift towards wetter conditions, led to an increase in the BFI (Δ_{wet}). Catchment vulnerability was measured by

$$\text{maximum percentage BFI increase} = \frac{\Delta_{wet}}{BFI_{\bar{d}}} = \frac{BFI_{\bar{d}^{-\%}} - BFI_{\bar{d}}}{BFI_{\bar{d}}} (\%) \quad (4)$$

and

$$\text{maximum percentage BFI decrease} = \frac{\Delta_{dry}}{BFI_{\bar{d}}} = \frac{BFI_{\bar{d}} - BFI_{\bar{d}^{+\%}}}{BFI_{\bar{d}}} (\%) \quad (5)$$

where \bar{d} represents the initial \bar{d} value, $\bar{d}^{-\%}$ represent the 20% (or 50%) reduced value for \bar{d} and $\bar{d}^{+\%}$ represents the 20% (or 50%) increased value for \bar{d} . In the following, we only considered as significant a variation in BFI larger than 10%.

The behaviour of poorly-drained and well-drained groups was different, and the main findings are summarized below.

A 20% decrease in \bar{d} values did not produce changes in BFI for any of the studied catchments, a 50% decrease generated BFI increases up to 20% (Figure 7 – left panel). Poorly-drained catchments appear the most vulnerable as they are associated with the largest maximum percentage BFI increases. Within this group, catchments with a combination of small K_s and large \bar{d} (large \bar{d}/K_s values) appear to be the most affected (Figure 7 c)). Catchments located at the opposite boundary, low \bar{d}/K_s (large K_s and small \bar{d}), were almost unresponsive to a decrease in dry spell length. The same could be said in the case of a shift toward wetter condition, where 20% and 50% \bar{d} increases generated almost similar effects on the studied catchments (Figure 7 – d), e) and f)).

339 The unexpected behaviour of some catchments in this analysis can be explained by soil properties.
340 This is for example the case of the Sele watershed, SEL, which is among the class of well-drained
341 the only catchment to be significant affected by variation in d (Figure 7 c)). Although in the group
342 classification based on K_s SEL clearly belongs to the well-drained group (Figure 2), if the d/K_s
343 ratio is used, SEL lays in the d/K_s range typical for the poorly-drained group (Figure 5). Different
344 from the other well-drained catchments, SEL bedrock permeability was not very large, and the large
345 BFI value (0.54), which forces SEL into the well-drained group, was probably generated by the
346 presence of very important alluvial deposits, rather than by large bedrock permeability. Soil
347 properties can also explain the difference between the Djidiouia (DJE) and Platis (PLA) watersheds
348 (Figure 7 f)). Characterized by similar values for K_s and d (and consequently d/K_s) and by the same
349 bedrock permeability (Table 1), PLA and DJE differed in terms of soil types, which were leptosols
350 and calcisols, respectively. The capacity of leptosols to hold water and contribute to baseflow
351 generation is low, which may have led to the BFI decrease detected by the simulation

352

353 **6. INFLUENCE OF DRY SPELL DURATION ON BFI IN SIMULATED VIRTUAL** 354 **CATCHMENTS**

355 To support and further expand the results provided by the analysis of the observed catchments, the
356 hydrological behaviour of a very broad set of virtual catchments was investigated.

357 The observed catchments selected for the current study covered a broad spectrum of climate
358 conditions, ranging from extremely dry and seasonal climate types to temperate and oceanic climate
359 types. The catchments also covered a broad range of BFI values and corresponding catchment delay
360 times (tightly related to BFI as shown in Figure 2). Assuming that the selected catchments cover the
361 range of hydrological catchment behaviours existing in Europe, the maximum and the minimum
362 values of the PRP and IHACRES model parameters calibrated for the observed catchments were
363 used as the range of model parameters (both PRP + IHACRES) in the synthetic simulation. These
364 simulations were used to generate synthetic streamflow time series for above two thousand “virtual

365 catchments” (Table 5). The virtual catchment behaviour was studied in terms of BFI assessment
366 and its variability with the d/K_s parameter.

367 Although a good correspondence was found between observed and virtual catchments, the BFI- d/K_s
368 domain described by the virtual catchments (Figure 8) extended beyond the range of the observed
369 catchments, which strengthened the significance of the findings, especially concerning the d/K_s
370 parameter.

371 According to Figure 8 (upper right panel), for a given d value, the effects of K_s on the BFI was
372 practically negligible for the poorly-drained group; a long and narrow tail in the BFI- d/K_s domain
373 was recognized for large d/K_s values, which corresponded to the lower range for K_s . The effect
374 became more important for the well-drained group because the spread of the BFI- d/K_s domain
375 significantly increased from larger to smaller d/K_s .

376 For a given value of K_s (Figure 8 right lower panel) the effect of d on the BFI assessment, measured
377 by the width of the domain, appeared important for the well-drained group (lower d/K_s values) and
378 particularly for values included in the interval 0.1-0.3, where the extent of the domain appeared
379 wider. The importance of d on BFI assessment was drastically reduced for the poorly-drained group
380 (large d/K_s values, larger than 0.6), for which BFI values were within the minimal range of 0.1-0.2
381 regardless of the d values.

382 Similarly to what represented for the observed catchments in Figure 7, Figure 9 illustrates the
383 maximum percentage BFI increase or decrease for the dataset of virtual catchments due to a
384 decrease and an increase in the dry spell length. The results found for the virtual catchments appear
385 congruent with the finding from observed catchments. A 50% decrease in d produces larger effect
386 than a 20% decrease, whereas the effect of a 20% and a 50% increase are similar in terms of BFI
387 changes. Larger changes are also in this case detected for large d/K_s .

388 It has to be noted however that the use of a percentage decrease or increase of the initial value of d ,
389 e.g., 20% and 50%, considered in the current analysis, implies that systems characterized by small
390 initial d values see a smaller absolute change in d (and d/K_s) than systems characterized by a large

value of initial d . As an example, [Figure 10](#) shows the modelled BFI variability for a set of virtual catchments featured by two extremely different initial d values and subject to the same 50% d decrease. Systems featured by the same K_s values exhibit a significantly different behaviour depending on their initial state. In the case of the lower K_s (the poorly-drained group) starting from a dry initial condition (large d) leads to a 30% overestimation of BFI variability compared to the case of wet initial conditions (red boxes in [Figure 10](#)). Differences are evidently dampened in the case of large K_s (the well-drained group, blue triangles in [Figure 10](#)). The range of variability of the d/K_s parameter is furthermore significantly larger in the case of initial dry conditions.

As this effect might distort the assessment of the impact of d variability on the BFI, the maximum BFI increase and decrease were standardized by a measure of variability of the d/K_s index, the standard deviation of the d/K_s ([Figure 11](#)). The simulation experiments showed that, even though under the same dry spell variation, the BFI vulnerability appeared higher for catchments poorly-drained systems, attributing an equal weight to the variations in d both in the case of dry and wet initial conditions, for tendencies towards both wetter and drier climates, the poorly-drained systems appear to have been less impacted by climate fluctuation than the well-drained systems.

To further support the results, the BFI vulnerability can be additionally studied in terms of BFI variability, the BFI standard deviation, beyond the maximum percentage increase/decrease. [Figure 12](#) indicates even more clearly how the impact on BFI variability decreases for large d/K_s ratios, thus for the poorly-drained group. In particular the maximum variability in standardised BFI was approached for a d/K_s values that correspond to the limit of transition between the well-drained and the poorly-drained groups as illustrated for the observed catchments in [Figure 5](#).

412

413 7. CONCLUSIONS

414 In a combined data-based and modelling study, where the hydrological behaviour of observed and
415 virtual catchments was investigated over a broad gradient of climate conditions and catchment

416 properties, we aimed to illustrate the impact of climate variability and, in particular, the impact of
417 dry spell duration on the baseflow process, as summarized by the BFI index.

418 An index based on the combination of catchment and rainfall properties, d/K_s , the ratio between the
419 dry spell length and the catchment delay time, was used to group catchments into well- and poorly-
420 drained groups and to measure the variability of the BFI index for a given rate of dry spell
421 variability.

422 As a general rule, the effect of the main hydrological parameter K_s on the BFI was practically
423 negligible for the poorly-drained group and became more important for the well-drained group as
424 the spread of the BFI- d/K_s domain significantly increased from larger to smaller d/K_s . The impact
425 of d on the BFI, as measured by the width of the domain BFI- d/K_s , appears to be important for the
426 well-drained group (lower d/K_s values) and drastically reduced for the poorly-drained group (large
427 d/K_s values, larger than 0.6), for which BFI values were set to minimal values regardless of the d
428 values.

429 With respect to the climate fluctuation and in particular an increase or decrease in dry spell length,
430 the tendency towards drier climates (extension of dry spell length) appears to have caused minor
431 hydrological impact, compared with the tendency towards wetter climates. The simulation
432 experiments further showed how, for tendencies towards both wetter and drier climates, the poorly-
433 drained systems appear to have been less impacted by climate fluctuation than the well-drained
434 systems and that the impact reached maximum values for systems laying in the transition zone
435 between well- and poorly-drained systems.

436 Although the virtual catchment behaviour enabled the assessment of general patterns of BFI
437 vulnerability, the study of the observed catchments provided a thorough knowledge of the
438 hydrological systems and shed light on the role of specific hydrological parameters, that is, the
439 catchment properties, on BFI assessment.

440 It is important to stress that the reported effects on the BFI variability produced by the variability in
441 the dry spell length do not represent the impact of climate variations on the full spectrum of the low

442 flow hydrological regime but on only one of the indices to be used to classify the low flow regime.
443 Being a long-term average index, the BFI is probably moderately sensitive to changes towards
444 more-or-less extreme climate conditions, but it is not insensitive, and future research on indices that
445 describe more extreme low flow features could show even more marked results.

446

447 **Acknowledgements:**

448 The authors would like to thank the associate editor and the anonymous reviewers for their valuable
449 comments and suggestions that resulted in an improvement of the current research work.

450 The authors would also like to thank the people who contributed to data provision, in particular,
451 Claudia Brauer (Wageningen University) for Hupsel data, Roel Dijkma (Wageningen University)
452 for Noor data, the Guadiana Water Authority, CEDEX, and AEMET for Guadiana data, Aristeidis
453 Koutroulis (Technical University of Crete) for Platis data and Madjid Mehaiguene (Khemis Milian
454 University) for Djidiouia data. The authors also thank Henny Van Lanen (Wageningen University)
455 and Marjolein Van Huijgevoort (KWR Water) for their encouraging discussions in planning the
456 research experiments. Funding from NWO grant 2004/08338/ALW and the Research Italian
457 Ministry (MIUR) under the grant ORSA154528 and ORSA164189 are gratefully acknowledged.

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574 **Figure captions**
575

- 576 Figure 1: Red frames indicate regions where the investigated catchments are located. Histograms of mean
577 monthly rainfall distribution are illustrated for each region. The Köppen climate classification map
578 is also provided (upper right corner) for identification of climate groups.
- 579 Figure 2: BFI dependence on slow storage delay times. Squares define poorly-drained and circles define
580 well-drained catchments.
- 581 Figure 3: BFI dependence on average dry spell d . Squares define poorly-drained and circles define well-
582 drained catchments.
- 583 Figure 4: Empirical relationship between average dry spell d and slow storage delay time. Squares define
584 poorly-drained and circles define well-drained catchments.
- 585 Figure 5: BFI dependence on d/K_s ratio. Squares define poorly-drained and circles define well-drained
586 catchments.
- 587 Figure 6: Modelling analysis flow chart.
- 588 Figure 7: Maximum percentage BFI decrease or increase as a function of d , K_s and d/K_s . Squares define
589 poorly-drained and circles define well-drained catchments. Light colours define 20% increase or
590 decrease in d ; dark colours define 50% increase or decrease in d . Right panel: dry spell length
591 increase. Left panel: dry spell length decrease.
- 592 Figure 8: BFI- d/K_s domain for observed (red circles) and virtual catchments (light blue circles). The insets
593 visualizes the effect of model parameters on the spread of the results. Right upper panel: effect of
594 K_s . Right lower panel: effect of d .
- 595 Figure 9: Maximum percentage BFI increase (left panels) and decrease (right panels) as a function of d/K_s .
596 Light colours (upper panel) define 20% decrease or increase in d ; dark colours (lower panel) define
597 50% decrease or increase in d .
- 598 Figure 10: Modelled BFI variability induced by a decrease in d of 50% in the case of dry initial conditions (large d)
599 and wet initial conditions (small d). Virtual catchments inside red and blue boxes are characterized by the
600 same K_s value.
- 601 Figure 11. Ratio between BFI maximum percentage increase and decrease and d/K_s standard deviation for a
602 decrease (left panels) and an increase (right panels) of the dry spell length d . Light colours (upper
603 panel) define 20% decrease or increase in d ; dark colours (lower panel) define 50% decrease or
604 increase in d .

605 Figure 12: Ratio between BFI standard deviation and d/Ks standard deviation for a decrease (left panels) and
606 an increase (right panels) of the dry spell length d. Light colours (upper panel) define 20% decrease
607 or increase in d; dark colours (lower panel) define 50% decrease or increase in d. Plot areas
608 included in the red boxes are enlarged in the adjacent illustrations.